

## JOSEFA'S "BANDIT"

By HENRY KIRK.

When I was seventeen I had an adventure that comes to very few.

I went to a ball at the house of Don Antonio Fuentes, ten miles from ours, on the Carmel road. Don Antonio was a cousin of my mother. My aunt Mercedes was with me, and some of the servants, and I promised my father I would be home in good time. I wore a white gown, with a single string of my mother's pearls around my neck. There was a rose in my hair, just below the pearls. It was white, like a pearl itself.

I danced with Don Francisco. The people shouted and clapped their hands, and every man threw his hat upon the floor.

Don Francisco begged me for the rose in my hair, but what could I do? Twenty others had been before him. He was no more to me than the others, even though we had known each other from childhood, and our fathers before us.

Well, it grew late, and I told Don Antonio we would have to go. My aunt Mercedes was with Dona Arcadia. I could see she did not wish to go, but I had told my father.

"Francisco will go with you," said Don Antonio.

"No, he will not," I said. "There are enough of us."

"It is folly Josefa," cried Don Antonio. "Morelo has been seen in the hills."

"Well, Don Antonio," I said, "I am not afraid of all the Morelos that ever were. I think I would like to see a real bandit. If he should come, our servants will frighten him away, and my Aunt Mercedes with one stroke of her fan could put fifty bandits to flight."

We said good night to Don Antonio and Dona Arcadia. When we got out into the patio there were twelve young men awaiting us. I waved them away. I would have no one. Diego was there with our horses. He had taken care of me since I was a baby. I was as safe with him as with any man in the country.

The twelve men looked at me with their hats in their hands. I laughed. "We have ten miles to go," said I. "Will you think of me that long?"

Then we went out of the patio and down the hillside into the valley.

Diego rode with us, the rest of the servants ahead. They reached the river and disappeared in the willows by the ford. Soon we were in the water ourselves. As we climbed the top of the opposite bank I saw Diego look suddenly straight ahead of him queerly. I grasped the bridle of his horse.

"Diego!" I cried. "What is it?"

I looked ahead. A man upon a horse was coming toward us. He was so far away I could not see his face. He reached our men and stopped them.

"It is Morelo," I gasped.

"It is only a traveler, Nina Josefa," said Diego, but I could see he thought it was Morelo.

"Do not shriek, Aunt Mercedes," I whispered. "Perhaps he has not seen us and he will go away."

For our servants were moving on, the man with them.

"He is deceiving them," I gasped. "It is Morelo. What shall we do? He knows I have been to Don Antonio's, and that I am wearing my mother's pearls, and that Aunt Mercedes has her topaz! We must reach him before he has a chance to slip away."

"No, Josefa," sobbed my Aunt Mercedes. "We shall all be murdered."

"With so many of us?" I asked. Our horses went faster down the road. Our servants stopped and awaited us. We reached them, and I looked straight into the face of the man. He took off his hat and bowed to my Aunt Mercedes and to me.

"I am Josefa Bernal," I said.

"And I—" he began.

"Yes, we know," I interrupted.

He bowed again and smiled, as if he did not mind, but I saw an odd look upon his face. No doubt an adventure like this did not happen very often.

"I am in good company," he said. "for I am going to your father's. I was just asking the way."

"Since you have never been there before," I said, "we shall be glad to have you with us."

"Josefa!" cried my Aunt Mercedes.

"Ah," I said, "pardon me; I present you to my aunt, Dona Mercedes Castro."

We went on down the road. The air was in my face like some one's dead breath. Something choked me. I put my hand to my throat, but there was nothing there but my mother's pearls. In my terror, I could not help thinking how handsome he was—as an angel!

"Your father is not expecting me," he said.

"No," I replied. "You did not tell him you were coming."

"It is so late," he went on. "But I did not wish to stay anywhere else. Since I have met you I am doubly favored."

"We were at Don Antonio's," I said. "He wished some of them to come home with us, but I was not afraid. I am afraid of nothing," I said, and laughed.

But I was nearly dead with terror.

"He had seen my pearls," I thought, "and Aunt Mercedes' topaz, and he is going home to murder my father."

We were nearly at the end of the valley. Beyond us was a wood and the hill with our house. In the darkness of the trees he would murder me and take my pearls and my Aunt Mercedes' topaz.

"This wood is half a mile long," I cried. "Who will get through first?"

We flew into the darkness of the trees. We could see nothing but the dim line of the road. Our horses went on like the wind. Every moment I was expecting my death. I cried out in terror.

That awful choking came. I put my hand to my throat, but there was nothing there, not even—yes, the pearls were there, but any moment his hands might be.

"Diego!" I cried. "Diego! Diego!"

The blackness of the wood was like a wall before me; then it opened. I was at the foot of the hill. The road flew under the feet of my horse. There was some one coming.

Morelo! for I could hear the whizz of his rials.

God in heaven, to have that thing around my neck with the pearls of my mother!

There was the house. The dog ran toward me, barking furiously. The horse stopped at the corridor. I stumbled to the door and fell into the arms of my father.

"Get every one," I cried. "Morelo is coming."

Then there was darkness.

When I opened my eyes I was in my room. The sunlight was coming through the windows. My Aunt Mercedes was sitting beside my bed.

"Ah!" I cried, "my Aunt Mercedes! Is my father alive?"

"Nothing has happened," said she. "I have had an awful dream," I said.

I could scarcely think it had happened at all.

"Come into the air," she said. "You will die if you do not have air."

You see, I was upon the point of death.

When I staggered into the corridor, there was my father, and heavens above—Morelo, looking at me with those wonderful eyes.

"Josefa," said my father, "this is Don Luis Ortega of Santa Barbara. He rode with you last night."

And my father laughed.

Don Luis stayed with us a month. He came again three weeks later. You know what happened. We were married.

My father has never allowed me to forget my adventure with Morelo.

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